What is bilingualism?
Bilingualism is when a person understands and/or uses two or more languages. A person is described as bilingual regardless of their level of ability in either language. Bilingualism is not a disorder and therefore is a description of the person’s language ability, not a diagnostic label. Bilingualism never causes or contributes to a communication disorder.

Language labels
Mother tongue, Home language, First language and L1 are all labels applied to the language a child hears in their home environment. Additional language, Second language and L2 are labels applied to the language a child hears in addition to their first language.

Routes to bilingualism
Different terms may be used to describe how a person becomes bilingual. Terms most commonly used are:

Simultaneous bilingualism
A child who has been exposed to two languages from birth or a very early age. This manner of bilingual language acquisition has been frequently studied but may not be the most common route to bilingualism.

Sequential bilingualism
A child who is exposed to an additional language after their first language. This manner of bilingual language acquisition has been less frequently studied but is thought to be the most common route to bilingualism.

Language competence
The term ‘balanced bilingualism’ is sometimes used to describe a person who speaks all their languages equally well. Balanced bilingualism is often held to be the ideal. However, balanced bilingualism is rare, and people with different levels of competence in each language should not be viewed negatively.

Additional language learning
Children and adults may acquire an additional language after they have acquired their first language. This language learning process is different to first language acquisition. As the person has already demonstrated that they have acquired their first language without difficulty, additional language difficulties should be regarded as educational issues rather than a primary language disorder.

The term EAL refers to English as an additional language. This is where a person learns English after learning their first language. This term should be avoided as the additional language may not be English. For example, in Wales, a person may learn English first at home and then acquire Welsh as an additional language.

Codeswitching
Codeswitching (also called code mixing and language mixing) is where a bilingual person uses two (or more) languages together. ‘Code’ is a linguistic term for a language. In intersentential codeswitching a bilingual person uses one language for one sentence, followed by another language for the next. In intrasentential codeswitching a bilingual person uses both languages within the same sentence. Codeswitching is normal and not a sign of confusion. There is evidence that children who have specific language impairment do not use codeswitching even when it is common to do so in their community.

Bilingual people with specific language impairment (SLI)
Bilingualism does not cause or contribute to SLI. However, SLI is just as likely to affect bilingual children as monolingual children. A bilingual child presenting with SLI will experience difficulties acquiring both (all) their languages. It is therefore essential for a speech and language therapist (with the assistance of an appropriately qualified co-worker, where applicable) to assess a child in the context of all the languages to which the child is exposed.
References

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2006. Communicating Quality 3.: (London: Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists)

Other relevant Glossary Sheets
As bilingual children and adults are just as likely to experience any of the communication difficulties as monolingual people, any of the other Afasic leaflets may be applicable.

Other organisations which can help
The Bilingual Family Newsletter
http://www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com

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